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Erik Kjyten

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In the shadowy recesses of my early recollections looms a long, lank Vossing with raven locks and flowing beard. I glimpse him now through the haze that many years have cast over my childhood memories. The image may, therefore, appear too lofty, or it may be confused with my conceptions of the Patriarchs and Prophets. Be that as it may, rather than let this benign being and hero of my childhood be unsung in the chronicles of pioneer days, I am determined to piece together as best I can a little story of this man.

His name was Erik Magneson Kjyte. We called him Kjyten. He traveled about in the Norwegian pioneer settlements as an itinerant tinsmith and general handy-man who served settlements in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. He was welcome whenever and wherever he came. How would mother's tinware have fared if Kjyten had not come along to mend it? And it was fair enough that he came to have a sort of proprietary right in every coffee pot in the settlements. I remember well that mother placed the coffee pot on the cook stove, quite as if by previous arrangement, when she saw him coming.

Coffee pot? Yes, it was always called that but it did not always contain coffee. Sometimes it was

forced to the humiliation of brewing a kind of home-made postum. But, nevertheless, a leak could not be tolerated. When such did occur our mothers would make the hole a little larger with a darning needle, then take a bit of clean white cloth, twist it to a point in one corner, and pull it in as far as it would go. When the superfluous ends were trimmed off they would say: "There, that's fixed. I hope Kjyten will come pretty soon."

But when the clock stopped and winding did not help, when its friendly tick-tock, tick-tock had ceased, the lonely pioneer cabin was painfully lonesome. How earnestly mother then hoped that Kjyten would come soon. What a thrill it gave her when the children all burst in through the door at once screaming at the top of their voices, "Kjyten kjæme, Kjyten kjæme! Eg saag han foste!" (Kjyten is coming, Kjyten is coming! I saw him first!) After perhaps months of waiting the tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock is again heard. Oh, what sweet music, and what a wonderful man! I stand with awe and admiration before my memory's image of that man to this day.

The clock mended and everybody happy, now is the psychological moment to shear the tousled heads beginning with the youngest. It is easy to capture him now and to get him properly perched for the operation. Kjyten is so adroit and expert and has such ways about him that, I declare, the little fellow never got around

to crying before he was all trimmed up and safely back in mother's arms again. When all her little boys were slicked up like regular gentlemen, and father too, there was an increased gleam of pride in mother's eye and a more cheerful humming while preparing supper for her flock that day.

As a barber our friend was unique in this, that he could and actually did cut and trim his own hair. Whether he served as tinner, clock repairer, or barber, Kjyten always seemed to consider the pay of minor importance.

It goes without saying that pioneer settlements were far away from everywhere. At one time in the history of our settlement, Iowa City was the nearest railroad station. Later the railway reached Marshalltown. Still later a locomotive puffed its way into Nevada. Mail service was, consequently, more or less periodic. News was a scarce article in the pioneer homes.

As a disseminator of news, church and state and from distant settlements, Kjyten was an important factor. Sometimes he carried a Norwegian newspaper that would be read by his hosts wherever he stopped until it was worn out, but, as a rule he delivered the news by word of mouth. He was a fluent talker and would tell interestingly of the political chaos in the South, of Indian disturbances in the Northwest, and of births, deaths, marriages and near marriages, and the general gossip in the older settlements from which his hosts

had emigrated. In our home, news from the Fox River settlement, Illinois, was of first importance.

Time has not dimmed my recollections of the happy moments when, late in the evening, the conversation beginning to lag, father would take down his accordion and, as it seemed to us, finger it aimlessly until Kjyten's beautiful baritone voice lifted us up and carried us on the wings of some folk-song to the charming fjords of Norway, or on some church hymn into the very presence of the God of love. And when mother added her pleasing soprano voice . . . well, I hope again to hear music that shall stir my soul as that did — but not here.

Another memory is also very vivid. On a trip to Nevada father had been assured by a Yankee that a certain patch of grass on the road-side was Kentucky blue grass. Having been told that blue grass was splendid for the lawn and hoping some day to have such a lawn, he came home from that trip quite excited and determined to go back as soon as he could to skin that blue grass sod off and relay it at home. He did as planned. The blue grass patch he thus secured was perhaps about three by six feet in size. Shortly after this was done it so happened that the time was opportune for the annual visit of the family to grandfather Follinglo out on Brushy Creek, about fifty miles west. The neighbor boys were able and willing to do the chores during our absence. Father instructed them

very minutely regarding the chores and admonished them repeatedly, and then again just as we drove off, not to forget to water the blue grass every day.

On the return trip father's anxiety to reach home was transmitted to the horses and increased their gait as the miles decreased. In record time we turned in and entered our yard. And what should father see, first thing, but a dog and a big man lying flat right on the most tender spot of the whole farm. With considerable vehemence he said: "Naa ska du sjaa den honda vaaso aa Kjyten ha leie blugrase mit ihael!" (Now that no 'count dog and Kjyten have choked the life out of my blue grass!) Father's fears soon proved unfounded, however, and Kyjten was again our welcome guest.

It is readily understood that a man who travels constantly and carries his shop with him must have a considerable burden. Kjyten carried his tools, a charcoal stove and a supply of charcoal packed on his back while in his right hand he carried a carpet bag containing his personal effects. As he walked from home to home the charcoal fire was not extinguished and the stove had to be so placed in the pack as to obviate danger from fire. This explains also why a faint cloud of smoke was the first and the last we saw when our friend came and went.

After the visit last mentioned, year after year passed without a call from our handy-man. Great changes

were taking place in our settlement. The railroad came up to our very doors. Tinners, barbers, and other artisans opened shops in the villages near us. The pioneer built larger homes and barns. The blue grass had overrun the whole yard, but Kjyten did not come.

At this time a bread-pan that mother had brought with her in the prairie schooner from Illinois was in need of repair. She took it to the tinsmith in Story City who pronounced it no good — past mending. The pan was dear to mother for sentimental reasons and the heartless verdict of the tinner nettled her. "I'll show those fellows", she declared, "who is no good when Kjyten comes. But," she added, "I fear we will never see him again."

In this she was mistaken. We had the pleasure of seeing him once more. On a midsummer day, his black hair showing threads of silver, his back bent under the familiar burden, humming softly, he came and, with pack removed, lay down on the velvety blue grass. The dog wagged his tail and lay down too. This time father had no fears for his blue grass.

We sought to show him our old-time hearty welcome and friendship, but somehow we sensed that it did not meet with the usual response. Our former cheerful friend seemed distant and downcast. His charcoal stove emitted a faint, blue smoke as of old. He asked: "How about your tinware?" It had been mended by the tinners in town. "Is your clock run-

ning all right?" Yes, we have a watchmaker in town. He looked at our heads which told him that there was also a barber in town.

Where formerly he had been needed he was now superfluous. His old friends and customers could get along without him. Wherever he came a certain declaration of independence met him in spite of the hearty welcome he received.

While we conversed with our friend under the shadow of a silver maple tree and some such thoughts as these saddened his heart, mother suddenly remembered her dear old bread-pan. Sure enough, Kjyten could and did mend it. "I told those town fellows", said mother, "that you could fix it." He smiled and for a moment we saw his old self again.

This was his last visit. He walked away slowly under his antedated burden enveloped in a faint cloud of smoke, humming a melody in minor key. Our eyes followed him over the first hill; then we saw only the smoke; and then — nothing. Thus passed the itinerant tinsmith and handy-man from our settlement.

Erik Magneson Kjyte, sometimes called Erik Morgan, died in Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1906. He is buried at Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin.

P. G. TJERNAGEL